



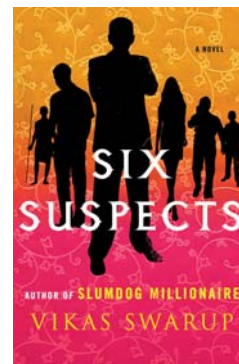
Six Suspects

By, Vikas Swarup

Minotaur Books

ISBN: 978-0-312-60503-2

On Sale 7/07/2009



About the book:

Seven years ago, Vivek “Vicky” Rai, the playboy son of the Home Minister of Uttar Pradesh, murdered bartender Ruby Gill at a trendy restaurant in New Delhi, simply because she refused to serve him a drink. Now Vicky Rai has been killed at the party he was throwing to celebrate his acquittal. The police recover six guests with guns in their possession: a corrupt bureaucrat who claims to have become Mahatma Gandhi; an American tourist infatuated with an Indian actress; a stone-age tribesman on a quest; a Bollywood sex-symbol with a guilty secret; a mobile-phone thief who dreams big; and an ambitious politician prepared to stoop low. Swarup unravels the lives and motives of these six suspects, offering both a riveting page-turner and an insightful peek into the heart of contemporary India. This eagerly awaited second offering is fiction at its best.

Reading Group Guide Questions:

1. What were the flaws of each of the suspects? Did you find each of them likeable, despite their flaws? Who did you identify with most? Did you have a favorite?
2. When we first meet the suspects, each is making a decision that will change their lives. In what cases were these good, bad, or foolish decisions? Could any of the characters have avoided their downfall? Do you believe in fate?
3. Do you believe that Mohan Kumar was actually possessed by a spirit, or do you take the doctor’s view? What do you think the author intended? If Mohan had been your husband, father, or employer, would you have preferred he stay Gandhi?
4. Vikas Swarup has chosen to relay each character in a different way. The chapters about Shabnam Saxena are told through her diary entries. The chapters on Jagannath are told through phone conversations. The chapters on Eketi are often actually told from the point of view of Ashok, the welfare officer. Did you find this method effective? How did it contribute to your understanding of each character?
5. The Motives section takes up the bulk of the novel and it deals with each suspect’s individual journey. Does the solving of the main crime become secondary to the lives of the suspects? Did you find that being steeped in the character’s lives enriched the solving of the mystery at the end?
6. It seemed that Shabnam genuinely wanted to help Ram Dulari in the beginning. But at some point she began to feel threatened by her. When did this happen? Was she ever really able to give selflessly of herself? Do you think her wanting to help Ram Dulari had something to do with her feelings for her sister? Does she redeem herself by the end of the novel?



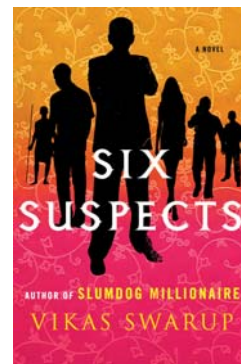
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7. *Six Suspects* has been called a social satire on India. In what ways is the book satirical? Did this add to your enjoyment of the novel? Which were the parts you found funniest?
8. How did you feel about the portrayal of the American, Larry Page? Do you think he is a typical American? Do you think his portrayal speaks toward how the world views Americans?
9. What do you think Shabnam and Larry would be like as a couple? Do you think they would be happy?
10. In the cases where the suspects were referred to by their professions, do you think they would correspond to their American counterparts? The corrupt politician in Washington? The Hollywood celebrity? The pick pocket in the big city? Or were they uniquely Indian? What do you find most appealing in reading international fiction? Learning about a different culture, or finding people and situations you can relate to?
11. A character like Eketi would have no real counterpart in the U.S. Were his motivations harder for you to understand? Or did they tap into a greater human need?
12. Family ties can be very strong, either from obligation or love. How did these relationships affect the characters' choices? Discuss how the characters were either helped or hindered by their families.
13. Many of the characters are impressed by beauty. Eketi falls in love with Champi, who is actually disfigured. She in turn, cannot see Eketi because she is blind. Are these two characters fortunate to not be so swayed by physical beauty, or are they missing out?
14. There is a theme that runs throughout the novel, of dual identities, or identity confusion. The corrupt Mohan Kumar becomes virtuous Gandhi Baba, Ram Dulari metamorphoses into Shabnam Saxena, Larry Page is mistaken for his namesake the Google founder, Eketi Onge is forced to become Jiba Korwa, Munna Mobile becomes Vijay Singh, and mafia don Jagannath Rai masquerades as a messiah of the poor. Do you find these questions of identity to be true in life? Have there been times in your own life when you have been mistaken for someone else, or perhaps even found yourself taking on a different persona? When you've noticed someone else taking on a different identity or name? What were the reasons for that?
15. Each of the suspects is either from the lower or upper class. Class is a theme that Vikas Swarup also wrote about in his first novel. What is the commentary here? How does class play into the plot? What is its effect on the characters?
16. How did you feel about the resolution of the novel? Do you think the characters got what they deserved? Did you agree with the murderer's reasoning for killing Vicky Rai?



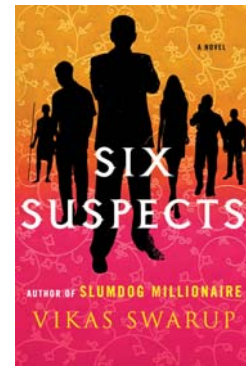
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A Q&A with Vikas Swarup

Q. How would you describe *Six Suspects*?

A. *Six Suspects* is the tale of six different people who are all suspects in a murder investigation. It is my attempt to capture the dissonant pitch of our times.

Q. What made you write *Six Suspects*?

A. I've wanted to experiment with a polyphonic narrative structure ever since I finished Q&A. One in which I could play around with both the voice and the form of the narrative. Thus you have six different characters telling you their stories through six different mediums. You have Munna Mobile and Larry Page speaking in the first person, but with distinctive voices. You have Shabnam Saxena conveying her story through her diary entries. You have a couple of chapters narrated in the third person, and then you have a character revealed only through a transcript.

Q. What was the inspiration for such a structure?

A. There were several. Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*, was one. It is an experimental novel in which a sequence of narratives is interrupted but never picked up again. More recently there was David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* in which six narratives are begun and then completed in reverse order. I liked the literary conceit of *Cloud Atlas* but I felt there was not enough of an organic connection between the six different stories. So I thought of writing six different novellas but with characters whose lives are constantly intersecting, whose ultimate motivations spring from a common source, and the murder of Vicky Rai thus became the overarching frame for the narrative.



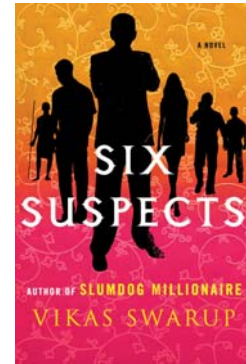
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Q. How long did it take you to write *Six Suspects*?

A. Q&A took me only two months, but *Six Suspects* took me a year and a half.

Q. You have stated that this was a difficult book to write. Were you facing the second book syndrome?

A. The difficulty stemmed more from my choice of narrative structure. In Q&A, I was writing about the interior life of one character. Here I am writing about the interior lives of six characters. I had to jump between voices and techniques, and at the same time ensure that the story remained coherent within the confines of the schematic space I had designed for it—Murder, Suspects, Motives, Evidence...

Q. So what did the writing of *Six Suspects* teach you?

A. I learned that maybe I should write a less complicated book, with only a single protagonist next time!

Q. Your book is being touted as a modern day Agatha Christie murder mystery. Would you agree with this?

A. I prefer to characterize it as a social thriller. It does begin with a murder and there is an investigation of sorts, but for me the murder is more interesting from a sociological rather than a forensic point of view. In my novel, the murder of Vicky Rai is both prologue and template. It is the framing device around which I knit the stories of the six suspects.

Q. "Not all deaths are equal." Your first line is quite a harsh indictment of Indian society. What made you choose this subject?

A. Well, wouldn't this apply to most other societies as well? Wherever you have disparities of power and wealth, you will have some people who are more equal than others, and the same will apply to their deaths too. I chose death, more specifically murder, because its anatomy



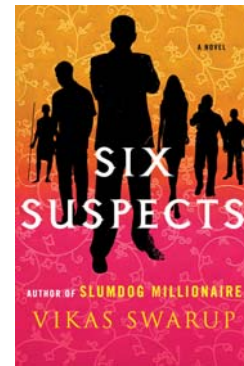
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seemed to lend itself more readily to the structure I had in mind i.e. a narrative with multiple voices.

Q. Your book is influenced in part by some real-life crimes in India like the Black Buck case and more importantly the Jessica Lall murder case. Why did you choose this particular case and is this book trying to say something about the case?

A. In many ways the Jessica Lall case was a defining moment for the middle class and the media. There was something very revolting about the manner in which she was killed, simply for refusing a customer a drink. I used an incident similar to the Jessica Lall case because it would resonate the most with readers, giving them an instant idea of how reprehensible Vicky Rai is. That said, it must also be noted that my book is not about the murder of Jessica Lall. It is about the murder of Vicky Rai.

Q. You flit between reality and fiction with ease. What were your inspirations for creating these characters? What kind of research do you have to do get the details (locality names in Azamgarh for instance) right? Does this stem from your interest in quizzing?

A. I wanted characters covering a broad social spectrum, but also characters who could enmesh with each other's lives. This required considerable research on very diverse subjects ranging from Dissociative Identity Disorder to Texan colloquial and from the philosophy of the Gita to the ideology of Al Qaeda. Needless to say, the hardest research was for the American and the Tribal chapters. I also tried very hard to make the six suspects not seem like stereotypes, by giving them very distinct personalities. Where, for instance, would you encounter a Nietzsche-spouting sex bomb, or an American like Larry Page?

Q. You have touched upon many issues in your novel – the criminalization of politics, the treatment of tribals, the Naxalite menace, corruption, fundamentalism, the nexus between business and politics, the cult of godmen, the search for compensation by victims of the Bhopal Gas Tragedy....Was your intention to encompass all the ills facing India in one book?

A. My primary purpose was to tell a story in an entertaining, engaging way. In telling the diverse stories of the six suspects, I had to use all of India as my canvas. The idea was not to



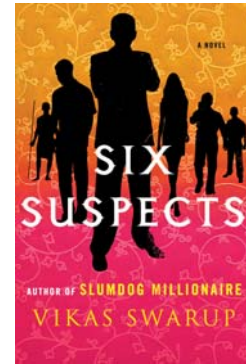
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“cram” everything in, but to look at India through six different eyes. If, in the process, the reader also gets an insight into some of the issues confronting our nation, then it is an added bonus.

Q. Do you worry that readers will enjoy the dark humor and the pace of your thriller-satire, but miss the basis of what makes these injustices possible? If readers were to take one thing from this book, what would you want it to be?

A. Someone wrote to me recently thanking me for writing something so readable, so enjoyable and at the same time so meaningful. I was very gratified because it showed that this reader was in sync with my vision for the book. But all readers are not equal. Everyone takes something different. What I would like readers to take away from the book is to reflect upon the millions of unspoken struggles that spin out in the background of our daily lives, that simply provide the noise against the drum beats of our consumerist, competitive culture.

Q. What, in your opinion, is the central theme of the book?

A. *Six Suspects* is about many things. It is a critique of our times. It is about the superficiality of our materialistic, consumerist culture. Above all, it is about the masks we wear in our daily lives. The leit motif that runs through it is of dual identity or identity confusion - corrupt Mohan Kumar become virtuous Gandhi Baba, Ram Dulari metamorphoses into Shabnam Saxena, Larry Page is mistaken for his namesake the Google founder, Eketi Onge is forced to become Jiba Korwa, Munna Mobile become Vijay Singh and mafia don Jagannath Rai masquerades as a messiah of the poor.

Q. What is the moral of *Six Suspects*?

A. I don't like to consider my novels as having a moral. But I want my novels to have a conscience.

Q. Very unusually, there are six first person accounts (actually eight counting the Chief Minister and Arun Advani). How easy was it to get into the skin of such disparate characters? Of the six suspects, which was/were the most challenging to create?



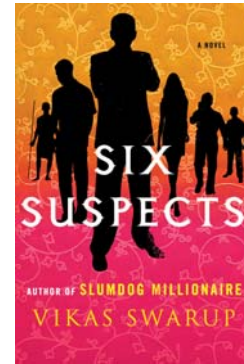
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A. The central motivation for this novel was my desire to experiment with a polyphonic narrative, hence there had to be these six (or eight) different narrative voices. Obviously some of the characters were easier to get into than others. Mohan Kumar, Jagannath Rai and Munna Mobile were relatively easy. Shabnam Saxena and Larry Page were slightly harder. And the most challenging was Eketi because I was trying to peer inside the head of a stone-age tribal and there were no obvious reference points.

Q. One of the most endearing characters in the book is indeed the tribal Eketi, from the Onge tribe. I believe it is the first time an Indian author has chosen to base a character on the primitive Andaman Islanders. What piqued your interest in the Andaman Islands?

A. The choice of Eketi as a character was inspired by a report I had read of how during the tsunami the primitive tribes of the Andaman had remained safe using their powers of medicine and magic. I was interested in the interplay between two totally diverse cultures; what would happen when a stone age tribal is confronted by the modern world. I chose the Onge tribe because they are relatively more socialized than the other tribes. They have a history of interaction with the settlers and even speak Hindi.

Q. Eketi, in the end, is shown as disillusioned with India. Was this a conscious choice?

A. You have to see where Eketi is coming from. The world he represents is very different from the world we inhabit. We are today living in a highly materialistic, competitive, consumerist culture, with a dog-eat-dog mentality. We worship beauty and put down ugliness. In such a milieu a stone-age tribal is bound to be a misfit. But I don't want to needlessly romanticize the tribal island. Eketi may be a noble savage, but he is trying to escape the circumscribed, still life on his island. It's just that the thrills that our modern world offers are not exactly what Eketi was looking for. And all that glitters is not gold. So Eketi's plight is, in a sense, the plight of every poor, powerless person living on the fringes of society. He would be disillusioned not just with India but, I imagine, with almost every other country in the world.

Q. What about Larry Page? How difficult was it to get inside the head of an American character?



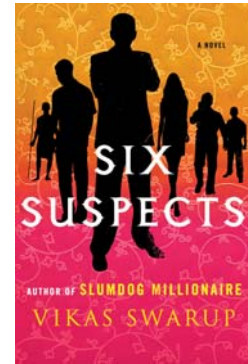
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A. It was not too difficult once I had worked out his background. I wanted someone with a distinctive way of speaking, but also someone that the reader would have sympathy for. Larry is a Texan and he speaks with a twang, but he is not a bigoted red neck. His story was inspired by a newspaper report of how an Indian girl had lured a foreigner into a fake marriage by sending him pictures of actress Aishwarya Rai!

Q. What made you choose a transcript mode for the politician's chapter?

A. Transcripts have become so ubiquitous in this era of sting operations. I am fascinated by them. A transcript is pure speech. The reader or listener is given no other clues. He has to create the entire setting, as it were, in his own head. So while a narrative in transcript mode can be challenging, it can also be very interesting, compelling some kind of participation from the reader.

Q. There was an Indian actress as one of the characters in Q&A. And there is an actress in *Six Suspects* too. Why this obsession with Bollywood?

A. There is no obsession. I wanted a female character as one of the six suspects and the character which fitted best with the demands of the story happened to be a Bollywood star. But I have tried to give her a very different voice; she is not a clichéd sex symbol.

Q. Do you enjoy writing?

A. Writing is tough, especially for someone who already has a proper day job. I would agree with Dorothy Parker who is reported to have said: "I hate writing. I love having written."

Q. What do you like most about writing fiction?

A. I think one of the greatest joys of fiction writing is to see characters who were living in your head come to occupy the imagination of readers from around the world. And then, of course, when readers tell you that your book gave them enjoyment or solace or comfort, then you feel the effort was worth it.



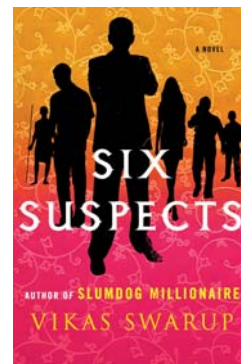
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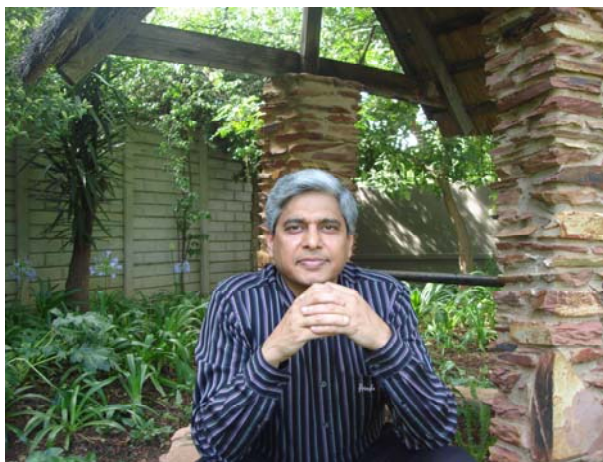
Q. Your first book *Q&A* has become a world wide phenomenon. Now that *Six Suspects* is also being translated into close to twenty languages and being developed for a radio play and a film, have you thought about giving up your day job and pursuing writing fulltime?

A. My publishers keep dropping such hints, but I refuse to take the bait. Success can never be taken for granted. Besides, I feel that having the security of a day job makes it easier for me to write in my spare time.

Q. What's next on the anvil for you as an author?

A. My next book is going to be very different from my first two books. For one, it will have a linear narrative. And it is set outside India, for a change.

About the Author:



Vikas Swarup's first novel *Q&A* was made into the Oscar Award–winning film *Slumdog Millionaire* and has been translated into over 40 languages. An Indian diplomat, Swarup's most recent post is as Consul-General in Osaka, Japan.

Check out these websites for more info on Vikas Swarup:

<http://us.macmillan.com/sixsuspects>

<http://www.vikasswarup.net/>